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# IN SPIRIT: BRINGING NEW LIFE TO THE FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENT

by Heather A. Brown

## Introduction

Ethnographic and historical studies of women and religion have thoroughly documented patterns of women's exclusion from positions of significant religious leadership. In many societies women have active religious lives, yet ecclesiastic hierarchies rarely include women, and official or "great tradition" religious concepts generally reflect men's and not women's priorities and life-experiences.

(Sered. 3)

Feminist theology has long accused Western religious traditions of inherent sexism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who can be called the foremother of feminist spirituality, began the tradition with a complete re-writing of the Judeo-Christian Bible. Her work, The Woman's Bible, offered a new vision of Western religion—one in which all anti-feminist, anti-woman passages were eliminated from the primary religious document of Western society. It was one of the first attempts at the creation of a Christian tradition in which the image of the Divine was presented in gender-neutral language.

When a new wave of feminism surged during the 1970s, Western religion was once again brought under attack by a small but outspoken group of women. Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary

Daly called upon Western religion to become more sensitive to women's needs for equality and empowerment. They cited biased language in religious texts, the lack of women leaders and clergy, and the male-only images of the Divine as three of the main stumbling blocks to women's full and satisfactory participation in the patriarchal Western religious traditions.

It is easy to point out the ways in which organized religion has failed women, but there is more to religious life than ritual and liturgy. Did the spirituality of Western religious traditions fail women as well? For the Feminist Spirituality Movement, the answer to these questions is "yes."<sup>1</sup>

A complexly intertwined critique of past spiritual personages and an examination of current women's lives, one example of which is given in Carol Ochs' Women and Spirituality, show the reasons why the answer is "yes." Traditional spirituality has an otherworldly quality:

The many definitions of traditional spirituality include turning away from this world, recognition of the transcendent, and so forth. Definitions of traditional spirituality grow out of the view that spirituality is the highest state of maturity. When maturity is seen in terms of a male developmental model, our highest task is to achieve individuation. This requires separation of the self from its supporting environment.

(Ochs 10)

The Divine was "up there," apart from the world and the concerns of daily life. To pursue the Divine in a spiritual fashion, you needed to remove yourself from the world and transcend the demands of community, body, and

normal human experiences. Many times it meant tremendous denigration and illness of the body—particularly of the female body which has been considered to be closer to nature and thus less inclined toward spiritual communion (Wilshire 95-96).

The above is, indeed, a narrow critique of traditional spirituality. It is, however, the critique most often used in feminist spirituality. Traditional spirituality is considered to be anti-woman and anti-body. It is seen as escapist. It does not deal with the here and now, but rather with the after-world or with that which is super-normal. A good example of the form of religion and spirituality commonly critiqued as “traditional” by the Feminist Spirituality Movement can be found in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple ( 47). Her protagonist Celie first follows the traditional path of religion and spirituality: “Well, sometime Mr. \_\_\_\_ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life be soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways.” Her daughter-in-law Sofia answers, from a more immanently-based understanding of religion, “You ought to bash Mr. \_\_\_\_ head open, she say. Think bout heaven later.”

Traditional spirituality has failed many women. There are, however, other spiritual options available to women. Some involve moving to traditions from other parts of the world. Others involve recreating or creating new forms of spirituality.

The 1960s saw a tremendous revolution in the United States. The anti-Vietnam War movement helped create a turbulent environment in which many new ideas were allowed to flower. Young people rebelled against the “traditional” values of their parents. Religion was one of the cultural foundations which they either completely rejected or attempted to rebuild. Many moved into the Eastern traditions and embraced the ideals of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. Interest also grew in Native American religions such as shamanism. The late 1960s and early 1970s also saw a resurgence of the feminist movement and the creation of the Feminist Spirituality Movement.



In a world of both growing secularism and evangelism, the Feminist Spirituality Movement sees itself as providing a new or better way for women to pursue a spiritual life or to make their lives spiritual, while cultural empowerment and equality are also important to the movement. It offers critiques of traditional spirituality designed to make those traditions more woman-friendly and presents new (or renewed) traditions which are woman-centered.

Despite its best intentions, the Feminist Spirituality Movement is a failure. It reaches an extremely small portion of the population. It effects no significant cultural change. In fact, the movement as a whole accomplishes very little except for what it has done for those very few people it touches.

In the last four years, I have become one of those few women it touches. In those years, I have also come to the conclusion that the Feminist Spirituality Movement just doesn't work. It might be a good thing for me personally, but it does not reach its goals in a societal sense. It has failed to make a difference in the Western religious traditions or in American culture.

The Feminist Spirituality Movement is not, however, destined for complete failure. With a few changes, it can become a viable political force and a significant arena for women's spiritual growth. By adopting some of the characteristics of "Womanism" or Afro-American feminist spirituality, the Feminist Spirituality Movement can save itself and get organized, utilize different types of spiritual activities, reach out to a wider audience of people, expand its participation base, and increase its political and voting power.

## **The Feminist Spirituality Movement**

### **A Brief History**

In this country's latest wave of the feminist movement, starting in the 1960s, the concerns of the participants were largely cultural and/or political. Women and their male comrades fought for women's equality and empowerment in the government, the arts, and the historical record. There

were also, as the years went by, struggles to see traditional aspects of women's work valued according to their worth, effort, and energy: "They did not just want the freedom to do what men have always done; they also wanted the freedom to do what women have always done, but to see it valued differently" (Eller 45).

One aspect of American culture was often overlooked by the feminist movement, however. Little or no discussion took place on women's participation and roles in organized religion. If women's worries about organized religion ever surfaced, the discussion often focused on the lack of women clergy, particularly in the Catholic Church. The discussion might also focus on political issues in which organized religion played a pivotal role—issues such as birth control, family planning, divorce laws, and marital legislation.

This wholly political/secular discussion of women in religion did not feel correct to many adherents of the feminist movement. For them, there were problems with women's participation in Western religious traditions. They had grave concerns about the way in which women participated in organized Western religions—from the secular issues dealing with women's equality in religious leadership to more esoteric questions such as whether or not organized religion could speak to women's experiences at all.

When it became apparent that religious issues were not going to be one of the main foci of the feminist movement, groups of women began to form a sub-movement which is called the Feminist Spirituality Movement: "First, secular feminism gave rise to concerns with religion and spirituality for some women whose experiences with feminism were particularly all-encompassing. Second, Jewish and Christian feminism went so far beyond the bounds of orthodoxy in some quarters that a new spirituality became necessary" (Eller 41). The first written work of the modern Feminist Spirituality Movement—"The Human Situation: A Feminine View"—was written in 1960 by Valerie Saiving. It was not until 1971, when Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether published their first essays, that the movement began to grow, and it

continued to grow until the most recent backlash against American feminism in the 1980s.

During its early years, the Feminist Spirituality Movement received tremendous criticism from the secular feminist movement. Feminists intent on changing culture felt that focusing on religion was a waste of time. Just as the 1896 convention of the National-American Women Suffrage Association officially repudiated Elizabeth Cady Stanton's The Woman's Bible as a work focusing on issues of less concern and importance than women's voting rights, the feminist movement of the modern era felt religion and spirituality to be of such an immediately personal quality that they could provide little assistance to women as a group (Christ and Plaskow, Introduction): "As Zsuzsanna Budapest recalls: 'Feminism, which you would think to be a natural ally of the women's [spiritual] traditions, resisted for many years with all of its political might. We were called 'bliss bunnies; nonpolitical, examining our navels. . .'" (Eller 188-189).

The Feminist Spirituality Movement, on the other hand, did believe that connecting feminist beliefs and religion would allow participants to make significant cultural changes. For them, church and state are never truly separate. In fact, church and state work together to help create culture. By creating a movement which uses both political might and religious understanding, the Feminist Spirituality Movement believed it could create massive social change:

...religious organizations have a unique role—even in terms of meeting women's **secular** needs and furthering women's **secular** interests. This connection has been made explicit by Spiritual Feminists. A cornerstone of the Feminist Spirituality Movement is that intellectual understandings of feminist principles are not

sufficient to bring about real changes in consciousness. Having grown out of the secular feminist movement, Feminist Spirituality has transferred political concerns to the spiritual sphere. Rather than functioning as an "opiate," religious involvement may empower women to work for social change in this world. (Sered 258)

Women involved in the Feminist Spirituality Movement believed that females would find no true equality until patriarchal religion was changed. According to women in the Feminist Spirituality Movement, many social and cultural oppressions of women were born in religious teachings and attitudes about women. Until that foundation was changed, society and culture would not change:

If the patriarchy is built on the foundation of patriarchal religion, male dominance will not be eroded until the foundation is razed. But more than this, a nonpatriarchal society cannot exist until a foundation has been prepared for it, a foundation that must of necessity be religious. This is the true source of the surge of religious feminists into the feminist spirituality movement. (Eller 48)

The Feminist Spirituality Movement believed that current Western religious traditions did not speak to all of humanity. Traditional religions and spiritualities focused only on male development and male standards. Male



experiences were the norm, and women were just expected to fit their spiritual lives into a male mold: "If religion is insight into experience, a religion developed out of partial experience cannot be adequate to the needs of a full humanity" (Ochs 2).

Currently, the Feminist Spirituality Movement is focused in two places. The first is the area of feminist theology. The second branch focuses mainly on the development of alternative religions and their accompanying rituals. In the next section, I will provide a formal definition of the Feminist Spirituality Movement and discuss these two branches in greater detail.

### A Definition

The Feminist Spirituality Movement is an extremely eclectic and unorganized phenomenon. Hundreds of different people who claim to be part of the Feminist Spirituality Movement write numerous books, give talks, conduct workshops, read poetry for the public, draw, paint, etc., and, for the most part, every single one of them has a different idea about the exact nature of the movement to which they belong.

Essentially, however, the Feminist Spirituality Movement is a title for the efforts of a group of women and a few men who believe that traditional Western religions have a tremendous influence on culture and that these religions do not provide women with enough opportunity for equality and empowerment in either the socio-political or the religious/spiritual spheres. The participants in the movement work to provide women with ways to reach their spiritual potential and to become empowered in both religion and society.

This definition, however, does not really discuss how the Feminist Spirituality Movement is spiritual. Many participants in the movement have offered definitions of "spirituality." All of the definitions are different. Commonly, though, spirituality is not defined as a thing. Rather, it is seen as a process:



The process of coming into relationship with reality is spirituality. In defining spirituality as a process, we must understand an active and conscious participation in reality. The process entails motion, change and growth—a transformation of our being and consciousness. The definition also includes relationship. This implies an awareness that spirituality is not merely a way of knowing, but also a way of being and doing. . . .

( Ochs 10)

In other words, spirituality is the process in which a person actively engages his or her environment, seeks to understand that environment, and works to change that environment if it is undesirable (King, Voices and King in Loades). It is similar to the Buddhist principle of Enlightenment. To be spiritual is to be awake. Take it one step further, and to be spiritual, to be awake, is to participate in the world, to actively attempt to change that world, to grow and move forward.<sup>2</sup>

But what of the Divine? Is the Feminist Spirituality Movement really religious, or is it secular? To help answer these questions, one more definition of spirituality is needed.

Spirituality is the process by which a sentient being carries out a relationship with that which is of ultimate importance in the universe.<sup>3</sup> For some, that which is of ultimate importance in the universe is called God/Jesus. For others, it is Allah. For some, it is money.

For the Feminist Spirituality Movement, that which is of ultimate importance is existence, is reality, is the environment. There is nothing which is not spiritual. There is only the spiritual.

There are many ways in which one can pursue a spiritual life. The

Feminist Spirituality Movement currently has two main groups through which the participants pursue their spirituality: feminist theology and the Goddess movement.

Feminist theology has a Judeo-Christian focus, and its main concerns are equal opportunities for women to obtain religious leadership positions, the eradication of sexism in religious texts, and an accurate portrayal of women in Biblical history. Rosemary Radford Ruether, of Northwestern University's Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, is one of the more well-known feminist theologians. She is the founder of WomanChurch. WomanChurch is a Judeo-Christian organization in which women are given the opportunity to play a pivotal role in church services. A more radical feminist theologian is Mary Daly. She believes that women should abandon traditional religions. For her, a woman who would be involved in Christianity is exactly the same as an African-American who would participate in a Ku Klux Klan rally. The Biblical scholar, Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, advocates a reinterpretation of religious texts. For her, the language of religion needs to be made gender-neutral in order for women to actively and positively participate in Western religions.

A second branch of the Feminist Spirituality Movement is the Goddess movement. The Goddess movement encompasses a variety of religious groups including Wicca, Druidism, and shamanism. Each branch has its own separate beliefs, and it would be impossible to discuss each separate group in this paper.<sup>4</sup> However, there are five basic principles which, on average, members of the Goddess movement hold to be valid: "valuing women's empowerment, practicing ritual or magic, revering nature, using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis, and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favored by the movement" (Eller 6). The Goddess movement is woman-centered, and women hold positions of primary leadership within each group. Some notable members of the Goddess movement are Starhawk, Z Budapest, Barbara Walker, Carol Christ, and Scott Carpenter.

## Demographics

The demographics of the Feminist Spirituality Movement are as follows:

Feminist spirituality is the late twentieth-century cultural creation of a small group of predominately white, middle-class feminists in their thirties and forties, a significant proportion of whom are lesbians.

( Eller in Wessinger 187)

Similar sociological profiles are mentioned in works by Ursula King, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Gloria Anzaldua, and Carol Christ. In all these profiles, the "common" participant in the Feminist Spirituality Movement is a Caucasian lesbian of the middle class.<sup>5</sup>

We can speculate as to the reasons why the profile reads as it does. We can cite the advantages of being part of the middle class as the reason why the financially comfortable are more likely to be part of the movement. We can say lesbians are drawn to feminist endeavors. We can say that college-educated women have more opportunities for exposure, through their education, to the various branches of the Feminist Spirituality Movement. These, however, are only speculations. What the profile does clearly indicate is a serious problem with the Feminist Spirituality Movement. It is reaching far too few women in too small a social subset. The Feminist Spirituality Movement is a failure.

## **Why is the Feminist Spirituality Movement a Failure?**

According to the demographics, the Feminist Spirituality Movement touches a very certain type of woman—a white, middle-class lesbian between the ages of 30 and 40 who has been college educated and comes from a Judeo-

Christian background. This sociological profile indicates that a very specific subset of American society is involved in the Feminist Spirituality Movement. The actual numbers of women who participate are small. Research estimates that there are 100,000 women who are involved in the movement (Sered 26-27). This is approximately 0.04% of the population of the United States. Why do these demographics indicate that the Feminist Spirituality Movement is a failure? Why does the Feminist Spirituality Movement have so few women involved?

The demographics of the movement indicate that it is a failure because they show that the movement does not accomplish what it is designed to accomplish. The Feminist Spirituality Movement does not meet its definition. It does not reach its goals or satisfy its mission.

According to the Feminist Spirituality Movement, Western religious traditions do not provide women with enough opportunities for empowerment and equality in either society or religion. The goal of the Feminist Spirituality Movement is to provide women with those opportunities through a revamping of Western religious traditions, the creation of new traditions, and a change in American culture.

For the 0.04% of the American population involved in the movement, these goals are fulfilled. However, the Feminist Spirituality Movement does not believe that only a few women deserve or need to have the opportunity to become empowered and equal. All women have the right to become empowered, not just middle-class, white lesbians. In essence, the Feminist Spirituality Movement is not helping all of the people it really wants to help.

This lack of participants also causes the Feminist Spirituality Movement to fail at another of its goals. Not only is the movement not reaching as many women as it wants to reach, it is also not able to have any significant impact on American religion, culture, or politics. The group has no lobbying activities or voting power. It does not influence the creation of legislation. It does not pressure the Catholic Church to ordain female priests.



The Feminist Spirituality Movement does not reach its goals. It is a failure for this reason. Why is the movement not reaching the women it wants to reach? What are some factors contributing to its failure?

The first two reasons the Feminist Spirituality Movement is a failure are tied to its demographics. The movement has strong connections with feminism and lesbianism. Societal perceptions of the nature of feminism and lesbianism may tend to frighten away women who might otherwise be drawn to the Feminist Spirituality Movement.

The feminist movement is, like the Feminist Spirituality Movement, comprised of a multitude of opinions and beliefs. On one side, there are radical separatist feminists who have little use for men at all. On the other, there are those who believe that feminism is simply treating women as if they are human beings rather than servants. Feminist positions occupy the entire spectrum in between.

The popular media, however, does not portray the feminist movement as a multi-faceted entity. Rather, people such as Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh portray the feminist movement as a rather one-sided, one-position, extremely radical and angry group whose characteristics tend to be repugnant to a vast majority of Americans. A quick search of the internet came up with this quote about the feminist movement from Pat Robertson, also quoted in The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1993: "It [the feminist movement] is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians." Feminists and feminist issues are portrayed in this fashion whether or not they actually fit these characteristics.

The feminist movement has gotten a "bad" reputation as a radical group of angry women whose main goal in life is to punish white men for crimes they may or may not have committed against women as a race. Some even think of feminism as a form of reverse sexism in which the male is oppressed. It does not matter if this is really what the feminist movement believes or



does. This is how it is portrayed, and this is how it is perceived by the public. Even if people, in actuality, do practice some feminist ideals, they still perceive the actual feminist movement in a negative light and refuse to be publicly identified with the feminist movement.

A similar situation occurs with lesbianism. Lesbianism is often perceived as extremely radical and anti-male. Many people feel uncomfortable associating with something seen so negatively in society. Despite the fact that there is nothing about the Feminist Spirituality Movement which demands that one be a lesbian to participate, women who would be uncomfortable with societal perceptions of lesbianism find it difficult to become part of the Feminist Spirituality Movement and its strong lesbian support base.

Another reason why the Feminist Spirituality Movement has failed is that the movement has moved away from its secular goals and its political agenda:

Criticism of feminist spirituality as insufficiently political has come in several guises. Probably the most common critique is that spirituality is overly personal and can therefore never address the concerns of women as a class. Feminist spirituality is at best a waste of time and at worst a serious distraction from more important political pursuits; it may help individual women, but it does not have the power to change the status of all women. The strongest criticism . . . comes from those who argue that alternative religions are always the ally of the ruling classes. Such feminist critics imagine the patriarchs laughing up their sleeves at the sight of women dancing and chanting under the moon, calling for the

patriarchy's downfall. They are right where the enemies of feminism want them to be, venting their rage to the empty skies: utterly harmless and more than a little silly.

(Eller 186-187)

The first criticism of the Feminist Spirituality Movement is that spirituality, in general, is too personal, and, therefore, a spiritual movement can have no real effect on American culture. Being a "personal" endeavour, however, does not exclude the Feminist Spirituality Movement from being a strong political and cultural force.

Spiritual movements have long had dramatic connections with cultural constructs and politics. Traditional religious values have influenced culture and religion on a variety of issues. In Ireland, the population recently voted to overturn that country's divorce laws—laws which had been based on Roman Catholic teachings on divorce.

Examples of the influence of religion in American culture abound. The first Europeans to settle this country did so because they wished to create a society in which they could freely practice their religion. More recently, Operation Rescue has been putting pressure on the American government to make abortion illegal. Their religious views influence them to attempt to create public policy. Similarly, Phyllis Schaffley was so compelled by her religious viewpoints that she abandoned any possibility of fulfilling the ideal role of homemaker in order to campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment. The Christian Coalition recently declared the Walt Disney Corporation to be "anti-family" because it extended life insurance benefits to the life-partners of gay employees. Marriage laws are influenced by religious ideas, as are a variety of laws governing sexual activity.

In cases where religious ideas have had significant impact on law and culture, there has been a conscious effort on the part of religion to effect social and political change. The personal becomes the public through a

focused effort. The Feminist Spirituality Movement, however, does not currently have any organized political activity. There is no conscious effort on the part of the movement, as an organized group, to make social change. Women do not go together as the Feminist Spirituality Movement to protest nuclear weapons testing. They go as feminists who might also happen to participate in the Feminist Spirituality Movement. The movement itself has no specific political agenda. It does not lobby. It does not rally, and it is not a strong secular force in this country. The personal never leaves the realm of the personal in order to create social change.

The Feminist Spirituality Movement makes no effort to be a political force in this culture. It does not actively attempt to change culture. This is not because the movement lacks cultural and political goals. Rather it is because the Feminist Spirituality Movement, as it currently functions, has an academic branch and a ritual branch—neither of which takes political action or actively works toward social change.

Feminist theology is a highly academic branch which is known for creating a massive amount of literature about the Feminist Spirituality Movement. Its proponents include Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Judith Plaskow, to name just a few. These scholars have produced a myriad of ideas designed to change current Western religious traditions in order to allow women to be better served spiritually. Very few of these ideas, however, have actually been put into use. There have been current efforts to change the sexist language found in religious texts and to introduce women into the clergy, but the feminist theology movement does very little other than critique traditional religions.

A similar situation occurs in the Goddess movement. A majority of the works written by members of Goddess religions tend to focus on religious "doings," such as rituals, spells, and magic. Starhawk and Z Budapest are perhaps the only two members of the Goddess movement who advocate feminist and political action as equal to ritual and religious magic. Unlike other religious groups, such as liberation theology, wherein the political is

religious and the religious is political, the Goddess movement has a separation of religion and politics. Thus, the Goddess movement, like feminist theology, is not political. It does not actively become a force for cultural change in America.

Although the Feminist Spirituality Movement advocates secular goals, it does not actively pursue those goals. Rather, it seems to hope a sort of osmosis will occur between it and society, thus changing American culture and religion. Eventually, through reaching enough people, they believe they will change American society. The movement, however, does not reach enough people, and it will never reach enough people to start changing the culture, actively or through a trickle-down theory of cultural change, unless it makes some internal changes and recreates itself.

### **In-Spirit—Womanism**

From the arguments found in the above chapter, it might sound as if I think the Feminist Spirituality Movement is mostly useless, even a complete failure. Nothing could be further from the truth. I feel that the movement has the potential to actualize its feminist goals. It simply needs to make some changes in order to reach that potential. One of the main criticisms of alternative religions is that they do not have enough impact on social issues. This is true of the Feminist Spirituality Movement.

The movement has no discernible cultural clout. It will not be at the 1996 Democratic Convention—as a solidified group—demanding that the Equal Rights Amendment be once again considered and then passed. And while individual women or even small groups of women will march on Washington demanding the right to reproductive control, the Feminist Spirituality Movement will not be issuing a statement—as a solidified group—that the right to abortion is the right of every woman. Although individual women do bring their spiritual beliefs into the public realm, the movement as a movement does not, and this makes it a failure. In order to



become successful, the Feminist Spirituality Movement needs to acknowledge its secular goals and its spiritual path to obtaining those goals. It needs to find some key unifying beliefs in order to become a political force fighting for significant social change. In other words, the Feminist Spirituality Movement needs to take a good long look at the Christian Coalition.

The Christian Coalition is a religious group effecting serious social and political change in this country. It has a large, wealthy, and vocal membership, and it continuously lobbies the government on issues it feels are religiously connected. It is particularly well-known for its lobbying efforts against pro-choice legislation and for school prayer.

The Christian Coalition is a perfect example of religious belief becoming political action. Everything the Christian Coalition supports is related to their religious beliefs and spiritual path. Everything the Christian Coalition does is designed to recreate American culture in its own image of what that culture should be. It is possible for the Feminist Spirituality Movement to become a liberal version of the Christian Coalition, at least in terms of its political strategy. In order to become an organization with political and cultural power of this sort, however, it needs to make some changes.

Much of the literature being produced by the Feminist Spirituality Movement does not acknowledge the secular goals of the movement. Rather, it speaks of sexism in religious texts or gives details of rituals designed around the worship of the Goddess.<sup>6</sup> It is time to say "Yes, our goals are secular in nature. We believe we can reach those secular goals through a spiritual path."

Acknowledging secular goals will help the movement become a unified political and cultural force. First, the various Feminist Spirituality groups around the nation need to sit down and decide what they really believe in and create a call to action for all men and women professing to be members.<sup>7</sup> This call to action will include a list of beliefs that are common to members of the Feminist Spirituality Movement as well as a plan of attack, including lobbying members of congress, participating as an organized force at rallies



and marches, and a massive publicity campaign.

Second, the Feminist Spirituality Movement needs to find ways to become something other than a movement which attracts mostly white, middle-class lesbians. One way to do this is to find other similar movements and learn from their successes and failures.

One movement which is very similar to the Feminist Spirituality Movement is Womanism or Afra-American feminist spirituality:

**Womanist 1.** From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expressions: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

**2. Also:** A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people,

male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Answer: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

(Walker, Gardens, Preface)

Womanism, as defined in Walker's collection In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, is a movement focused in the Afra-American community and born out of the feminist and civil rights movements.<sup>8</sup> It has the same goals as the Feminist Spirituality Movement (empowerment and equality for women in religion and culture through spiritual and religious means), yet it takes a different approach and reaches a different group of women.

An analysis of the above definition, which is similar to the mission statement of a not-for-profit organization, shows some of the strengths of Womanism. These are some of the strengths which the Feminist Spirituality Movement needs to gain in order to reach its goals.

"Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender": feminism is seen as a pastel political organization, 'It lacks strength,' it is only one small group

fighting in a multi-faceted campaign. Womanism, on the other hand, is vibrant. It is a political group coming from and utilizing a strong spiritual background in order to fight its battles against the status quo. It is for everyone of all races and orientations. Womanism is not a separatist group—a criticism which is often leveled against the Feminist Spirituality Movement. A Womanist takes action rather than thinking about taking action or complaining without attempting to make changes—another criticism leveled against the feminist movement.

A Womanist is an ideal feminist. She wants to know more than is “considered ‘good’” for her. She is willful. She takes responsibility for herself, her actions, and her people. She loves the fight against the patriarchal white establishment, and she loves herself and other women for the values, emotions, and strengths found within them.

The strengths of the Womanist movement are vibrancy, a history of political activism, connections with traditional spiritualities which inform their political activism, and a history of working with men to make cultural and religious change. The Feminist Spirituality Movement also has strengths which are useful in the fight to create cultural change. These strengths include the ability to desire and welcome change and variety, an understanding of the ways in which traditional religions can be negative experiences for women, the creativity to try new and unusual ways to provide women with opportunities for empowerment and equality within religion and culture, and a large body of written works—both popular and academic—which provide avenues for people to learn about the values and actions of the movement.

A combination of the two movements would look like this: it would use both traditional religious viewpoints, as found in the Womanist movement, and new religious viewpoints, such as those found in the Goddess movement, to create a political organization which actively attempts to create a culture in which there is common acceptance of feminist beliefs and common practice of feminist ideals. The new movement would be a movement which actively

uses religion to create social change and provide women with the opportunities needed for equality and empowerment.

Like Operation Rescue and the Christian Coalition, this new version of feminist spirituality would use its religious beliefs to fight for social change and political legislation. This new spiritual feminist would be able to say such things as "I fight for women's equality because God made men and women equal." She or he would also be able to say "Both men and women have the right to be priests because God speaks to women as well as men. Look at Mary Magdalene."

By combining the strengths of Womanism and the Feminist Spirituality Movement, it is possible to create a new spiritual feminism which uses religious beliefs to fight for cultural change. This allows the Feminist Spirituality Movement to survive, albeit in a new format, and thrive as it reaches its secular goals and becomes a success.

### **Conclusion**

For the past four years, I have been studying the Feminist Spirituality Movement. After a long and painful process, I decided that it was not working. It did not reach enough people. It did not actualize its goals. It was not making any changes in American culture.

The Feminist Spirituality Movement encourages its members to think and change, however, to listen to an internal voice and to trust that voice:

The movement as a whole works to strengthen women's identities and to give them confidence in themselves. Virtually every handbook on feminist spirituality advises women to heed their 'inner voices,' to know that their intuition is trustworthy.

(Eller 227)



As I listened to my inner voice, I did feel that the message and the goals of the Feminist Spirituality Movement were worthwhile and important. They just were not being actualized by the movement as it currently functions. A combination of the strengths of Womanism and the strengths of the Feminist Spirituality Movement is just what the Feminist Spirituality Movement, in a new form, needs in order to become successful. By combining the best aspects of both, the movement becomes vitalized. It becomes fresh and new, and it reaches out to more women, to more people, than either one ever could have alone. Now women do have a fighting chance to become spiritually and culturally empowered.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Of course, spiritual feminists vary in the degree to which they believe this. Some, like Rosemary Radford Ruether, believe that although Western religion and spirituality have failed women, there still exists the possibility for positive change. Others, like Barbara Walker, believe that traditional paths should be abandoned and new ones created.

<sup>2</sup>In my definition, I assume that violence, hate, etc. are not part of a spiritual path. Spiritual growth is growth to what is seen as positive.

<sup>3</sup>This definition comes to me via Professor Ron Miller through the influence of William James.

<sup>4</sup>Selena Fox of Circle Sanctuary, a Wiccan center in Wisconsin, said that at last count there were at least seventeen different varieties of Wicca being practiced in North America and Europe.

<sup>5</sup>In Eller's main work, Living in the Lap of the Goddess, the complete sociological profile is of women who are white, middle-class, college-educated lesbians of



Jewish or Christian background who are in their thirties and forties (18).

<sup>6</sup>Some of the literature does provide examples of rituals which can be used for social and political change. Such examples, however, are in the minority.

<sup>7</sup>This one could be something similar to the Women's Environment and Development Organization of the Women's Foreign Policy Council's Pledge of Allegiance to the Family of Earth:

I pledge allegiance to the Earth,  
and to the flora, fauna  
and human life that it supports,  
one planet, indivisible,  
with safe air, water and soil,  
economic justice, equal rights  
and peace for all.

The above pledge is found in Return of the Great Goddess, edited by Burleigh Muten.

<sup>8</sup>Alice Walker is not the only proponent of Womanism. However, she is the creator and definer of Womanism, and others who work along the same path follow her lead.

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